



ALL ABOARD:

8 Considerations for Increasing Health Engagement

*Written for Virgin Pulse by Fran Melmed
Founder, context communication consulting*

context
[communication consulting]

Introduction

Employers who use gamified technology platforms and their related challenges—individual, collaborative, and competitive—yield striking results, especially when these platforms are aided by thorough and extensive communication and broad leadership support. Even so, these platforms can't address all needs or get to all people. They're a piece of the puzzle.

Within the past five years, employers—particularly larger ones—have adopted sophisticated technology-based platforms to bolster their wellness efforts. These platforms offer several benefits. They're turnkey, an important marker for stripped-down and stretched human resources departments. They're customizable, allowing one solution to morph to meet different individuals' goals and interests. They're open, readily accepting data from various consumer health tools and devices. They're "gamified," meaning they employ simple game mechanics to increase stickiness. Often, they're truly games: fun, collaborative, and based on specific principles designed for learning, fulfillment, and growth.

As a result, these platforms are head and shoulders above a one-size-fits-all approach to wellness. Still, the truth is we're reaching some employees, but not all and not nearly enough.

When you speak with colleagues or listen in on health engagement webinars, you hear the concern: How do we reach X or Y audience? The audience they're struggling to reach might be retail workers, customer service representatives, manufacturing employees, truckers, or office staff. Or the audience could be men over 50, tobacco users, or some other discrete part of the workforce.

This paper outlines universal considerations all employers can use to reach more and specific groups of employees. They don't provide answers or come with how-to instructions. They're meant to prompt thinking. (Don't despair—at the end of the paper, we do include some immediate action steps!) Because inspiration comes from anywhere and everywhere, these eight considerations reference approaches, examples, or research from public health, government studies, and citizen activists as well as employers.

The truth is we're reaching some employees with our health and wellness efforts, but not all and not nearly enough.

Consideration No. 1: Work Realities

A manufacturing employee shows up at work and learns that day when his shift ends, because his employer announces overtime on a daily basis and adjusts shifts periodically throughout the day as output gets measured. A customer service representative is tied to her desk, headset strapped on for hours, with little allowance for stretch breaks or mental decompression from calls with angry or conversation-starved customers. An office worker runs from meeting to meeting, not knowing if he'll have time for a bio break—let alone to grab a healthy meal or take the steps necessary to keep his team in the 12,000 steps per day challenge.

Employees regularly experience such obstacles to participation and replenishment. In its review of workplace wellness programs, RAND discovered they often don't account for barriers associated with specific jobs and work environments. Focus groups RAND conducted revealed how "poor accessibility to wellness activities because of rigid work schedules and wait times" limited wellness benefits, even when an employer provided paid time off for participation. "White collar employees took advantage" while maintenance workers could not



// You can have the best wellness program in the world, but if the culture isn't changed you're not going to be able to change their [employees'] habits on an ongoing basis. //

Susan Piglia, AVP, Corporate Wellness,
Ochsner Health System

Ochsner Health System is a non-profit multi-specialty healthcare system composed of eight hospitals and 38 clinics located throughout Louisiana. It has more than 10,000 employees.

because of "work schedules and mandatory overtime." Separately but equally important, employees can't find the time to relax their minds and rejuvenate their bodies, as much because of cultural norms as work demands.¹

It will take management education and buy-in to bring the nature of the workplace and prioritizing health into greater harmony, and to show how prioritizing health improves work outcomes. Thankfully, evidence such as RAND's aids discussion about money invested and ROI lost when harmony doesn't exist. In addition, research is building on everything from walking while working to energy breaks and naps, and how these are a source of productivity, not a symbol of slacking.

You'll Get Farther with a Strategy

Is health and wellness an engagement strategy for your company, or is the focus on more immediate cost containment? Whom do you need to reach and what's impeding you: data, participation, trust? How you answer questions like these will direct your efforts and investments. As only half of businesses have an articulated health and productivity strategy, creating one is clearly the place to start.²

¹ Workplace Wellness Programs Study: Final Report, RAND Corporation, 2013 (http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR254.html)

² 2013/2014 Staying@Work™ Survey Report, TowersWatson

Consideration No. 2: Gender

In a recent study out of the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health, researchers found men were more likely to delay care for serious health conditions when covered under a high-deductible health plan. Women, on the other hand, delayed care for milder concerns or made preferred changes like eliminating unnecessary emergency care visits.³ Yet when it comes to work-life stress related to pregnancy and maternity leave, child care, and elder care, women feel it more and often make career-ending decisions as a result.⁴

From health risks to health-seeking behaviors, from life's gifts to life's burdens, gender frequently plays a role. In response, so must the approach. A growing trend provides an example of designing a solution for the intended audience. "The glass ceiling has been broken; now there's a health center just for men," teases a line in a *New York Times* article on medical centers designed exclusively for men. These medical centers break through to the medically reticent male by appealing to his risks and his vanities (prostate exams to hair replacement and Botox) in a social, club-like atmosphere. The popular Movember campaign—which began as a bunch of Australian men growing mustaches for fun and morphed into a fundraiser for prostate cancer before settling into its current status as a worldwide men's health campaign—is a worthwhile example of what communication and partnerships yield.

While not possible for employers to create male-only medical centers, it's certainly within the realm of possibility to dedicate a day of a health fair to men's health. Or to create communications tailored to the men in your workforce and the health concerns you know they're facing—or not addressing. With flexibility highly valued for a variety of reasons, maximizing the effectiveness and reach of work-life policies is another way to respond.

// We had one employee get her annual mammogram who otherwise would not have. Because our incentives encourage this preventive screening, she went and found she had early stage breast cancer. //

Beverly Davis, Director of Finance,
Howard County Public School System

The Howard County Public School System, located in suburban Maryland, consists of 74 elementary, middle and high schools, and approximately 8,500 employees.

Tackling lack of participation or specific health risks by gender begins with understanding the data and then driving forward with a tailored solution.

³ The Impact of High-deductible Health Plans on Men and Women: An Analysis of Emergency Department Care, Kozhimannil, Katy B. PhD, MPA, *Medical Care*, August 2013, Volume 51, Issue 8 (http://journals.lww.com/llwm-medicalcare/Abstract/2013/08000/The_Impact_of_High_deductible_Health_Plans_on_Men.2.aspx)

⁴ More Caregiving, Less Working: Caregiving Roles and Gender Difference, Lee, Yeonjung and Tang, Fengyan, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, November 2013 (<http://jag.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/10/29/0733464813508649.abstract>)



Consideration No. 3: Age

If we thought tailoring solutions for the workforce was tricky before, consider where we are today. In the U.S., the workforce is aging and people are working longer.⁵ In other countries, such as Japan, the workforce is shrinking as more people near retirement and depart. Elsewhere—India, Mexico, and Brazil, for example—the workforce is young and untested.⁶

Such a broad range of ages in the workforce means employers must be prepared to address the represented health priorities (pregnancy to end-of-life decisions), prepare employees for varying life stages (college to retirement), and consider varying viewpoints about work's place in one's life (bill-paying to purpose-providing), all while delivering content in a curated, customized, and portable way.

In its 10th Annual Study of Employee Benefits Trends report, MetLife devotes a section to the generational conundrum employers face, and

// We want to engage everyone in something. Having a broad spectrum of things gives a better level of involvement ... We recognize that different things motivate different people, and you have to put a lot of options out there. //

Kevin Herman
Director of Worksite Wellness
The Horton Group

The Horton Group and its 300 employees and offices across four states provide insurance, risk management, and employee benefit solutions for a variety of companies and industries.

equips employers with plentiful insights as to how to prioritize the different communication preferences, life stages, and priorities a four-generation workforce represents.⁷

Research like MetLife's won't supplant company-specific knowledge, but it can enrich it.



⁵ The Aging U.S. Workforce: A Chartbook of Demographic Shifts, Stanford Center on Longevity, July 2013 (http://longevity3.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/The_Aging_U.S.-Workforce.pdf)

⁶ Six Global Trends Shaping the Business World, EY.com (<http://www.ey.com/GL/en/Issues/Business-environment/Six-global-trends-shaping-the-business-world---Demographic-shifts-transform-the-global-workforce>)

⁷ 10th Annual Study of Employee Benefits Trends, MetLife (http://benefitcommunications.com/upload/downloads/MetLife_10-Annual-EBT.pdf)

Consideration No. 4: Family Involvement

Family members are often heavy users of health care and dominant in the choosing and using of employer-provided benefits and services. Employers understand this, and do everything from expanding eligibility to directing communications to the home and internet in response. It's a smart move, particularly for reaching the "chief health officers" in the household: women.⁸

However, family involvement extends beyond eligibility to primacy. We believe our family greatly influences our lifestyle and health choices, and research backs up this perception.⁹

The Framingham Study is one of the better-known studies about social influence. This study discovered if a spouse becomes obese, the likelihood of the other spouse or partner doing so increases by 37 percent. (Worth noting: Between friends, the likelihood is 57 percent.) On the more positive side, the same study found the happiness of one partner increases by 8 percent when the other partner is happy.¹⁰

Data like this reinforces the wisdom of working with the family as a unit. It was the deciding factor behind Virgin Pulse allowing up to three of members' families and friends to join for free. It was likely a driving factor behind IBM's decision in 2007 to add the Children's Health Rebate to its eligible rebates for U.S.-eligible employees. Eligible employees who choose this rebate earn \$150 by participating with their children in what IBM calls "field experiences," which include a range of age-appropriate games that support parents' desires to instill healthy habits in their children while building the means for adopting those habits as a family.¹¹

// Every Ascend family is entitled to good physical, financial, and mental health. With every wellness program we offer, we go out of our way to make sure spouses are eligible to participate and receive incentives. //

Michael A. Martin, Total Wellness Director,
Ascend Performance Materials

Ascend is a global manufacturer of chemicals, polymers, and fibers. Headquartered in Houston, Texas, Ascend has five U.S. manufacturing locations and 2,300 employees.

From health care to healthy living, employers
have a critical ally in partner and child.



⁸ General Facts on Women and Job-Based Health, U.S. Department of Labor, December 2013 (<http://www.dol.gov/ebsa/newsroom/fshlth5.html>)

⁹ Health Barometer, 2011: Global Findings, Edelman (<http://healthbarometer.edelman.com/2011/10/health-barometer-2011-global-findings/>)

¹⁰ Family, friends can influence weight and mood (from *Harvard Men's Health Watch*) (http://www.health.harvard.edu/press_releases/family-friends-can-influence-weight-and-mood)

¹¹ https://www.wellnessforlifecenter.com/article.cfm?articleID=18672#Rebate_CHR

Consideration No. 5: Language Differences

Out of necessity and practicality, U.S.-based employers make English their standard language for employee communications. When it comes to reaching certain target audiences, however, this standard requires deviation. Take for example Pitney Bowes' efforts to improve the health and well-being of its Hispanic and Latino employees by increasing health plan enrollment and use. To reach this audience, Pitney Bowes partnered with its insurer to create targeted, bilingual communications for print and web, make available bilingual customer service representatives and health professionals, and provide training and other outreach¹²

Another company, Saint-Gobain North America, built a network of wellness champions and used them as a direct communication channel and avenue of peer support. In its manufacturing facilities that employ a number of ESL speakers, Saint-Gobain relied on champions for language

// Virgin Pulse was able to localize our program across our dispersed workforce. Most of the messaging is company-wide, but the campaigns themselves are on a local level. //

Michael A. Martin, Total Wellness Director,
Ascend Performance Materials

translation and technology instruction, equipping the champions with “shift breaks in a box” and other standardized materials to ensure quality and consistency of messages.¹³

How to bridge language divides, and in what instances it's appropriate, is something each employer must review based on the cost of both action and inaction.



¹² Pitney Bowes tailors health information to Latino workers with United Healthcare's Latino Health Solutions, *Employee Benefit News*, 2013 (<http://ebn.benefitnews.com/news/equity-healthcare-robert-gavin-employer-sponsored-health-care-here-to-stay--2729890-1.html?pg=2>)

¹³ Employee Wellness Champions: Attracting, Training and Recognizing Your Volunteer Army, Health Promotion Live (<http://vimeo.com/41577392>)

Consideration No. 6: Culture and Race

Reaching goals within a specific audience often requires cultural or racial translation, instead of language translation.

In 2011, Dr. Regina M. Benjamin, the acting Surgeon General of the United States, made waves when she highlighted hair care as an obstacle to women working out. While critics responded with other recognized obstacles like the all-too-real second shift for women, Benjamin's focus was on a singular and, in some instances, cultural truth.

None other than Harvard Public Health, the New England Medical Center, and the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases recognized her truth when they created the Sisters Together Campaign that addressed barriers to exercise, including hair care, as part of an overarching campaign to address obesity among African-American women.¹⁴ These organizations first piloted Sisters Together and then turned the fine-tuned program into self-directed resource materials that empowered trusted citizen activists (hair stylists, homemakers, retired persons) to design, implement, and measure the program within their own communities.¹⁵

An analogous and more current example is Black Girls RUN!, a nonprofit founded by two female citizen activists. Black Girls RUN! uses social networks, ambassadors, bold T-shirts, and runs through local communities to advertise its existence, recruit new members, and model a lifestyle.

These two examples demonstrate the power of understanding your target audience, involving that audience in the design of an effective intervention, and then empowering them to implement, adapt, and measure its use.



¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Minority Health (<http://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/populations/remr/black.html>)

Sisters Together Program Guide, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) (<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/sisterstogether.htm>)

Consideration No. 7: Technology

Technology is both boon and bane to employers. As employers know all too well, employees' embrace of technology varies and depends on access and technology literacy as well as the user experience of the platform or website they're using. Accordingly, technology's upside is often thwarted by these things and the cost of addressing them: kiosks, technology training, customer service support.

Still, technology has greatly improved efficiency and made certain tasks much more cost-effective and personalized. Just think back to a world that relied heavily on print for a reminder. It's also collapsed boundaries, connecting dispersed workforces domestically and globally. The advent of telemedicine and digital health will bring employers an even greater breadth of tools for delivering health care and stimulating behavior change.

A big, immediate opportunity rests with employers and mobile optimization. Fifty-three percent of Americans own smartphones, increasingly over a broad spectrum of ages, and spend more time on them than the web.^{16,17,18} Globally, ownership figures near those of the United States, and in some instances surpass them.¹⁹

We look first to our phones to lead us to the information we need, including health advice. Fifty-two percent of smartphone users have used their phone to look up medical or health information and nearly 20 percent have a health app on their phone, according to the Pew Internet Project.²⁰

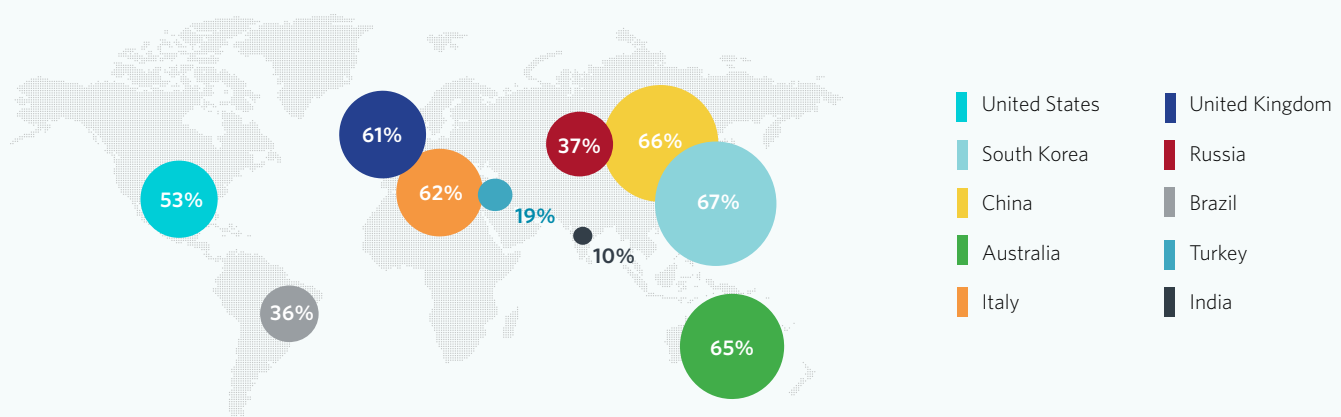
// We tested the program on employees with varying levels of activity and technical know-how, and attitudes about wellness. They found the program engaging, easy to use, and motivating. Even the people with more limited technical abilities liked it, which was big. //

Renae Coombs, Benefits & Wellness Manager, SAIF

SAIF is Oregon's not-for-profit, state-chartered workers' compensation insurance company with nearly 1,000 employees.

These numbers suggest the opportunity employers have to put material literally in the palms of employees' hands. To make the most of this opportunity, employers must migrate their information, quickly, not only to the internet but to a mobile-friendly and adaptive environment. The transition demands comfort with making information transparent and broadly accessible. In return, it allows employers to leapfrog hurdles: the cost and oversight associated with kiosks within certain work environments, and firewalls around all.

How many of us use smartphones?²¹



¹⁶ Smartphone Milestone: Half of Mobile Subscribers Ages 55+ Own Smartphones, Nielsen, April 2014 (<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2014/smartphone-milestone-half-of-americans-ages-55-own-smartphones.html>)

¹⁷ Smartphone and Tablet Penetration in Developed Markets, Marketing Charts, January 2013 (<http://www.marketingcharts.com/wp/topics/demographics/tablet-adoption-less-age-dependent-than-smartphone-ownership-in-developed-markets-25824/attachment/deloitte-smartphone-tablet-penetration-developed-mkts-by-age-jan2013-2/>)

¹⁸ How Smartphones are Changing Consumers' Daily Routines Around the Globe, Nielsen, February 2014 (<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2014/how-smartphones-are-changing-consumers-daily-routines-around-the-globe.html>)

¹⁹ The Mobile Consumer: A Global Snapshot, Nielsen, February 2013 (<http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2013%20Reports/Mobile-Consumer-Report-2013.pdf>)

²⁰ Health Fact Sheet, Pew Internet Project (<http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/health-fact-sheet/>)

²¹ The Mobile Consumer: A Global Snapshot, Nielsen, 2013. (<http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2013%20Reports/Mobile-Consumer-Report-2013.pdf>)

Consideration No. 8: Income

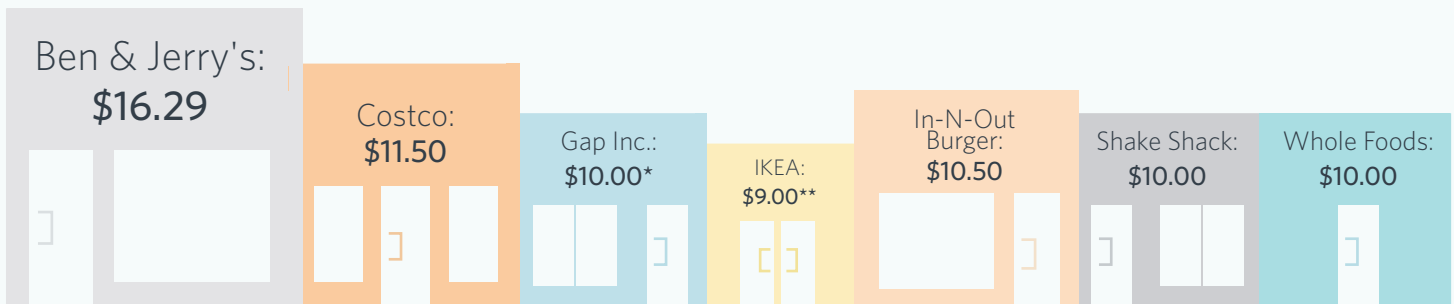
In general, living under continuous financial hardship impairs decision-making capabilities.²²

But certain populations within the workforce are grappling with even more serious consequences. A growing appreciation for inequality's societal impact has highlighted how education, income, and other social determinants of health lead to intractable health problems. Research connects poverty and lower incomes to food insecurity and inaccessibility, decreased activity, and higher degrees of stress. Living in low-income or at-risk neighborhoods can mean limited access to nutritional foods and safe, walkable communities. Stretching one's income can lead to favoring high-calorie, low-nutrition foods over better-quality but more costly foods—and bypassing important medications and doctors' appointments, too. It most certainly affects one's ability to pay (again and again) for tobacco-cessation products or cover gym costs and the additional childcare hitting the gym often requires.

Recognizing the impact of a non-living wage, Seattle followed Sea-Tac in passing a \$15 per hour minimum wage, leading the country. And companies like Costco and Whole Foods are lauded on Wall Street (and elsewhere) for their "conscious capitalism," including wage and benefits practices that lead, along with other talent strategies, to lower turnover, higher productivity, and happier customers than other retail outfits.²³

With income so closely connected to health, stress, and decision making, your company's compensation strategy is as much a health engagement tool as anything else in your arsenal. It makes business sense to reality-check it and your benefits design, including incentive design, to see how they limit medical and lifestyle adherence.

7 companies that aren't waiting for congress to raise the minimum wage²⁴



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**to take effect January 1, 2015

²² How Poverty Taxes the Brain, CityLab (from *The Atlantic*), August 2013 (<http://www.citylab.com/work/2013/08/how-poverty-taxes-brain/6716/>)

²³ Costco Proves That Big Retailers Can Offer Employers Healthcare, Business Insider, August 2012 (<http://www.businessinsider.com/costco-proves-big-retailers-offer-employees-healthcare-2012-8>)

²⁴ 7 Companies That Aren't Waiting For Congress To Raise The Minimum Wage, Huffington Post, June 2014 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/26/companies-minimum-wage_n_5530835.html)

Make Employees Engageable™

Employers today and moving forward face a workforce with greater racial diversity, a broader age range, and an evolving set of work-life expectations. These characteristics portend enormous changes and challenges for talent strategies and considerations for health engagement specifically.

The considerations outlined here aren't a cure-all, nor are they exhaustive. Age, gender, language differences—these of course aren't the only aspects requiring examination. As discussed in a partnering paper, **Breathing Life Into Wellness: How a Total Quality of Life Approach Improves Productivity, Engagement, and Healthy Outcomes**, employee health and well-being isn't related to lifestyle behaviors alone or addressed simply by communicating in the native tongue.

Stress from poor work relationships, a disconnect from the company mission, the lack of autonomy on the job, concern and worry over loved ones—all of these combine to create a disengaged employee. By using these considerations as a springboard, an employer can move its business closer to being one that helps employees have the energy, focus, and drive necessary to thrive at work and in life.

See [Breathing Life Into Wellness: How a Total Quality of Life Approach Improves Productivity, Engagement, and Healthy Outcomes](#) for more on the importance of making your employees engageable.

5 Things You Can Do Now to Increase Access and Involvement

1. In your communications, use only images of people who actually look like your employees and their families.
2. Charge your wellness committee with determining how work demands interfere with program use. (Don't have a wellness committee? Create one.)
3. Talk with HR, managers, and other connectors who distribute information to non-English speaking or ESL employees to identify shortcomings and opportunities.
4. Review your data to isolate the biggest costs and the most disinterested groups.
5. Administer a survey to learn what mobile devices employees own and what apps and tools they use to monitor and maintain their health.

About the Author

Fran Melmed is the founder of context, a communication consulting firm specializing in workplace wellness. Fran's work with clients including Comcast, Cigna, and IKEA has helped employees and their families make better health care and lifestyle decisions.

Fran is also the co-founder of CoHealth, a virtual community focused on workplace wellness innovations, and is a frequent speaker on health and well-being.

Learn more at
www.contextcommunication.com



About Virgin Pulse

Virgin Pulse, part of Sir Richard Branson's famed Virgin Group, helps employers create a workforce with the energy, focus, and drive necessary to fully engage at work and in life. With its award-winning online platform, the company fosters healthy daily habits and sustainable behavior change that help employees thrive at work and across all aspects of life.

Unlike narrowly-focused employee health and engagement solutions, Virgin Pulse is a hub of consumer-focused strategies and innovative tools that set the foundation for a company's engagement efforts. More than 250 industry leaders representing 1.5M+ employees have selected Virgin Pulse's programs to reinvigorate their workplace.

Learn more at www.virginpulse.com.

